

The Care and Feeding of Volunteers

Introduction

The St. Augustine Historical Society was founded in 1883 and from the beginning collected books and other materials related to St. Augustine. The library is located about 4 blocks from the mother ship and is in a 200+ year old historic house. For those who are offered the opportunity to use a historic structure as a library I can only say tread carefully but that is a tale for another time. Since its inception volunteers have been an integral part of the society. Currently the Research library has a core group of 20 plus volunteers who in 2012 provided over 5,000 hours of volunteer labor. We have several volunteers who have been with the library between 20 and 30 years, longer than many of the staff.

A volunteer's tale

To understand a bit of the difficulties the Research Library has had in the past running the volunteer program is best told through one volunteer's experience 4 years ago.

There was a story in the local newspaper about the need for volunteers to assist the library in digitizing at risk photos. So this person replied to the email address supplied. About a month later with no response the wanna-be volunteer sent several more emails. One weekend while in town he saw the library was open and stopped in the librarian on duty gave him a tour, told him that someone would be in touch and assured him they would be in touch. Luckily the volunteer did not hold his breath since it was almost a month later before someone contacted him and never mentioned

anything about the delay. He finally became a volunteer and was assigned to scan some documents. His training consisted of about 10 minutes of do this, do that and you'll figure it out. Over the next year our intrepid volunteer spent time on many projects, often being treated to someone seeing him coming in and trying to figure out what he should do. Our volunteer had no idea how these projects fit into the overall job of the library.

Now I was that volunteer, when the head of library resigned I waited an appropriate amount of time, about 30 seconds to apply for the position. After several months I was hired and I knew that the volunteer program was something I needed to improve. One interesting point was the Executive Director spoke to several of the volunteers about me before making her decision.

What a volunteer program need

Volunteers are seductive, the idea that someone unpaid can help the organization meet its needs without the expenditure of vast quantities of money.

A volunteer program requires a structure around it with defined goals and means to achieve those goals. Our program is structured around the following:

1. Someone needs to be in charge of the program
2. Volunteers need to understand what they are doing and how their work fits into the overall goals of the organization
3. Volunteers need training in what they are going to be working on

4. You need to fit the capabilities and availability of volunteers with the projects you have
5. Providing volunteers with a choice of projects can be win-win situation
6. You have to know how to fire a volunteer
7. Feedback is necessary and a two way conversation
8. Never exceed your span of control
9. Never underestimate the power of food

How we implemented the volunteer program

I would be dishonest if I was to say that we quickly developed our volunteer program and solved all the problems in a short period of time. The reality is that it grew organically over the period of about a year. The key to the success of the program has been putting one person in charge of it and providing everyone, volunteers and staff, with a single point of contact. The library has only three staff members one who works 3 days a week and one who works 4 days a week. Debby Willis is my assistant librarian and she had been working with the volunteers informally so being a manager I made the volunteer program one of her responsibilities. All three of us work with volunteers, help them and can recruit volunteers. Debby is the overseer of the program, keeps tracks of the projects, assigns new projects and maintains our register of volunteers. The key to a single point of contact is that you keep everyone on track and moving forward. When I was a volunteer there was no one in charge as a result I worked on a number of projects and never got to finish any of them. As I said we

did not correct all of our mistakes quickly. I was talking to Tom a volunteer and asked him how long it took for us to get in touch and he said three months. We've reduced that to less than 2 days.

Over the past three years we've held volunteer meetings, usually over pizza or soup and talked about where the library is going, what our goals are and how the volunteers fit into where we are going. One nice thing is that our graybeards often provide feedback on how a suggestion was tried in the past and how it fared. We are able to modify the idea so that it will succeed. The volunteers who have been with us the longest often serve as the library's corporate memory when we have no idea why something was done this way or why we don't do something. I feel that our volunteers are more invested in the library and the society because we tell them about what we are doing.

This year we are starting an educational series for our volunteers. We will cover the history of the society, the history of the library and the history of the area around the library. We started out with a tour of the Oldest House complex which is the headquarters of the society. We had about 40 volunteers and spouses attend and at most only about 5 had ever been to the complex. We want to make them feel part of the overall society as well as the library.

Debby as the head of the volunteer program insures that when a volunteer starts they know what they are doing. We provide guides to how to digitize and catalog images as well as our other projects. She works with them as they are starting and provides feedback. As they gain more experience she spends less direct time with them though she does do quality control

checks on their work and helps them improve. This provides positive feedback for the volunteers who want to do a good job and feel that we care about what they are doing and that what they do has value.

One of the key factors is the need to fit the knowledge and capabilities of the volunteers with the projects that need to be accomplished. A volunteer who hates computers will perform poorly when placed on a digitization project when they are perfectly happy processing collections. Sometimes an understanding of their past experiences provides you with better returns. An example is John who was working on scanning when I was hired. About two weeks after I started he came up to me and matter of factly said that we were not backing up our files and we weren't getting the most out of our PastPerfect software. It turns out John had experience as a database manager and large computer systems. After discussions with both John and Debby we ended up giving John the opportunity to design his own job. He now spends 15 to 20 hours a week working on our PastPerfect database and more importantly documents everything that PastPerfect doesn't tell you. If we had to pay John we wouldn't be able to afford him, but by making use of his expertise we are moving forward faster than we would have without John. Tom, the volunteer I spoke of earlier, has experience in marketing and serves as a sounding board for our marketing ideas. He is so interested in the society that he was elected to the Board of Trustees.

Volunteers are just that, they choose to come to your organization and give their time to you. So we try to keep our processes and procedures for "hiring them" to a minimum. This does not mean we lower our standards

or let them do what they want but rather we try to make the process a positive one. Often when someone stops in they want to know what type of projects are available and what they might work on. For them this is important since if what you have doesn't appeal they aren't going to stick with it. I would much rather figure this out before we go through the trouble of training them. So when someone wants to volunteer we do two things. First we give them a tour of the facility and we allow them to peruse a list of projects we have to get an idea of what they might do. This has been a big selling point and allowed us to weed out those who probably would not have worked out.

One thing to remember is that not everyone who wants to be a volunteer can be and sometimes a volunteer just doesn't work out. Ideally we want to weed out folks who aren't qualified or not a good fit before they become volunteers but sometimes we can't do it. So we occasionally have to "fire" someone. Usually people realize they are fitting in or working out but when they don't we should let them go in the best possible way. Each case is different but sometimes you have to be honest and make the break. We had a volunteer who seemed fine but gradually began to be more disruptive and not contributing. It turns out that she had stopped taking needed medication. We all try to be compassion it but once you recognize someone is not working out you have to make the break. Otherwise they become disruptive, suck up too much staff time and cause you to lose your productive volunteers.

Many years ago consultants documented a number of new ways to manage staff. One thought was MBWA, or managing by walking around.

The idea is that if you hide in your office you won't know what is going on and your productivity will fall. So all of the staff make a practice of regularly talking to our volunteers, asking them how it's going and what do think about what is going on. Luckily our volunteers are not shy and realize that we want to know what they think. This two way conversation has helped us realize where things were doing well and where things could be done a better way. As I said John made a significant difference in our PastPerfect database simply because we talked. Talking with other volunteers pointed out better ways to do things and how we could work more efficiently. Not only does this help us but our volunteers can feel better connected with what they are doing and invested in the goals of the organization.

Another management term is span of control. How many people can you control in an effective manner? Debby and I often engage in a discussion over how many volunteers we have. She wants to have more volunteers so that we can accomplish our goals more quickly. My question to her is does she have enough time to check their work. So we have to have the delicate balance between how many people we can handle versus the amount of work we want to accomplish. The normal reaction is to get as many people in to accomplish the available work but we want to avoid either having a back log of work that is unchecked or having to redo work. So you have to understand your span of control and balance desire with reality. Ideally in the future I hope to find a volunteer, volunteer coordinator who can assist us with the recruitment of volunteers and provide all of us with more time to review completed work.

The final point I have to make is that we should never underestimate the power of food. We don't use food as a bribe nor as an incentive. For many of our volunteers their time with us many things, it is opportunity to put their skills to good use, to feel needed, to get out of the house, usually at the spouses encouragement, and to socialize. We provide opportunities for them to meet with each other throughout the year. About twice a year we provide soup or sandwiches at a meeting so we can update them on what we are doing. Our educational programs will get everyone together and allow them to socialize with their coworkers. But by far the most popular item is the Publix Chocolate Chunk cookie. This cookie is popular because it provides the greatest ratio of chocolate to cookie and is a nice treat. We keep our cookie jar in the break room full of cookies and volunteers can take a break, have some tea and cookies and talk with their fellow volunteers or staff. If I run out of cookies I hear about it and notice that when we a sufficient amount of chocolate chip cookies that our volunteers look forward to taking a break and their productivity increases.

In conclusion nothing I've said here is earth shattering or new but rather our experience with volunteers. We are very lucky to have volunteers to be so committed that they call and ask permission to take the day off, or if they miss a day will make up the time. We don't require or encourage volunteers to do so, they are volunteers not staff members. Our volunteers allow us to perform projects that we would not be able to undertake. They do not displace existing staff members and I would resist the urge by anyone who would suggest that we do so. Volunteers are adjuncts and allow us to do more with less. As we move forward we intend to provide

more education experiences for our volunteers and will continue to provide cookies in the cookie jar.

Thanks for your attention do you have any questions?